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AUTHOR Dempsey, June
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ABSTRACT

Learning assistance is a relatively new idea in education in the United States since most learning centers have come into existence since 1970. Although developmental education has become accessible in remote areas and many financial and psychological barriers have been lifted, much more could be accomplished in this area if more evaluative research were available. The ultimate goal of learning assistance should be to make learners successful. Several principles underly the theory of learning assistance instruction: (1) instruction should begin at or slightly below the point at which the student is functioning; (2) praise should be given for successful endeavors; (3) respect for the learner increases his or her self esteem and self confidence; (4) learning takes place in a relationship; (5) there is no substitute for skillful instruction; (6) the dynamics of the learning situation influence learning success; and (7) successful learning depends on the utilization of all available clues concerning the learner's strengths and weaknesses. The organizational structure must be found that meets the needs of the individual learning center, although it should be kept in mind that the model will never be finished. (JF)

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LEARNING ASSISTANCE

CHARTING OUR COURSE WITHIN REACH

An address delivered to the Eleventh Annual
Western College Reading Association Conference

by June Dempsey

Long Beach, California

March 17, 1978

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Learning Assistance

Charting Our Course Within Reach

It probably will come as no surprise to you that Plato never mentioned learning assistance. But he did caution us that as speakers we should know the truth of the matter about which we are speaking. (43:2) And just what is the truth of the matter where learning assistance is concerned? Perhaps the most that one can hope for from one discourse is a small piece of the truth. And that at the end of this conference there will be many pieces of the truth that will emerge to enable us to chart our courses and bring them within reach of the populations we serve.

Today's community colleges exemplify education's attempt to be within reach. Dr. Dale Parnell (36) of San Joaquin Delta College lauded the uniqueness of the American junior or community college in its attempts to be geographically, financially, psychologically and academically accessible to the 70 to 75 percent of the population who for varied reasons do not seek their post-secondary learning experiences in a four-year college or university. In fact, it was the community college that decided the moot question, "Who shall be educated and for what?" (32:2) The people of California ended the debate by demanding that college doors be opened to all potential educational consumers in the community and that programs be designed to meet their educational expectations. Community college educators were immediately faced with the twofold challenge of providing what the consumers wanted and helping them to overcome the barriers of age, sex, lack of or deficient prior educational experience and low socioeconomic status.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMS

The parallel of the development and the philosophy of community college education and developmental education programs in colleges and universities throughout the nation is noteworthy. These programs with varying titles - Learning Center, Learning Assistance Center, Learning Resources Center, Reading/Writing Lab, and Tutorial Center, to name a few, are also new on the American education scene, the majority coming into existence after 1970. (15:73) In keeping with their youthfulness and diversity, they embraced innovation and daring as their destiny and welcomed the challenge of the low-achiever, ill-prepared, learning disabled, linguistically different and culturally divergent populations. Yet it must have been tempting to take up a cry of futility similar to that expressed by Sabina, the maid, in Thorton Wilder's "The Skin of our Teeth" as she reflected on the latest tragedy to befall the Antrobus family. You may recall Wilder traces the history of mankind and the tragedies that have befallen him. He illustrates man's temptation to give up in the face of overwhelming odds with Sabina's cry, "I'm tired of starting over. It's too difficult; it's futile." (35:3) How often they must have found themselves starting over with a new group of students with complex needs and problems.

Or, it, undoubtedly, would have been easier to sit comfortably on the popular definitions of mankind that seem to abound in the literature of our Western culture today proclaiming man an existential absurdity. The logical conclusion would have been that it really wouldn't matter what was done, so why bother? How often

they must have found themselves trying a new method or materials wondering whether they would make a difference.

Or, perhaps even more likely, would have been the temptation to have felt helpless and ill-prepared to cope with such extreme needs and insurmountable problems. After all, instructors are hired to teach, not to deal with older students who have forgotten how or maybe never learned how to study, or students who can't communicate in English, or people with financial problems, or handicapped who need help getting into our facilities because of physical barriers, or disabled readers who can't pronounce words, or the lonely and frightened who need so much encouragement and understanding. How often they must have found themselves wondering whether they had the skills to deal with these problems.

But those who had somehow found their way from English departments, remedial reading classrooms and counseling centers into learning assistance or perhaps been forced into these low seniority, many times non-tenured positions seemed instead to celebrate the diversity of their non-traditional clientele and take pleasure in validating the premise that "there resides in every human community certain talents, potential abilities, and capacities which - given guidance, training, and disciplined knowledge - can be put to work for the benefit not only of the individual but also of the entire community." (5:16)

What I am applauding and affirming is the creative psyche of learning center personnel exemplified by their dedication, ingenuity, flexibility and positive outlook. Perhaps these mavericks of the academic community who like Thoreau have cast conformity behind them and stepped to a different beat were drawn to the needs of

the new learners because of a response to the idealistic themes of commencement addresses, the desire to return to the Greek vision of creating a community, KOINONIA: empathetic spiritual beings participating in one another's lives, or perhaps the prior witnessing of learners who did grow and change and fulfill the expectation of a nobler assumption of man. But whatever the reason, learning center personnel have continually rerouted, overcome and, when necessary, struck down the barriers that prevented access to learning.

MAKING LEARNING ACCESSIBLE

In keeping with the philosophy that information about and strategies for learning must be provided in places convenient for consumers (20), outreach programs (24) have extended learning center services throughout the campus (3:5) as well as to off-campus centers. Mobile units and campus extensions have further reduced geographical barriers by delivering learning assistance to remote mountain areas and desert outposts; urban store front centers have become commonplace.

Financial barriers have been lowered by a variety of State and Federal grant and loan programs, but the learning center has stepped in to fill the voids with book loans and emergency fund loans that can be tapped by instructors as the need arises. (8:112)

Psychological barriers that students face have traditionally been a foremost concern of reading and study skills instructors. Strang (49:831) urged reading specialists and consultants to become competent in personnel work and Enright (18:83) reported interview techniques and weekly conferences were incorporated into

remedial reading courses in the 1940's. The importance of attending to students' psychological needs has been reaffirmed by Capuzzi (9), Klausner and Osen (29). The counseling approach has enabled the learning facilitator to employ a philosophy of continuous diagnosis (13) in contrast to the clinical approach of a complete battery of tests followed by an extensive period of remediation. While diagnostic teaching (48) of reading and study skills has been an efficacious approach for students with learning difficulties, it is needed even more with the non-traditional students so much in evidence in our centers today.

The importance of self-concept and its relationship to academic success has been demonstrated in the literature of our field. Peer tutoring is an acknowledgement that learning takes place in a relationship.

Kerstiens (28) also demonstrated the learning center's concern for the psychological needs of its clientele when he described the ombudsman function of the center. His description affirmed the posture of the learning center as the voice for the concerns of the non-traditional student as well as the agent for campus change.

And, of course, academic access has been and still is the core of learning assistance - its reason for being. From Enright's (18) recount of the development of the learning center concept we can conclude that helping students learn how to learn or how to study appears to be the evolutionary impetus behind the development of learning centers. Yet, when we address ourselves to the question, "How well have we done in achieving the objective of causing students to learn?", we find contradictions among those who have reviewed

the literature.

PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

Roueche (40) concluded that little effort had been made to evaluate the effectiveness of our programs. And that, furthermore, the evidence that existed revealed problems in the uses of standardized tests, the placement of students, the abilities of instructors in handling underachievers and goal clarification of programs.

And Emond (17), in reviewing the status of remediation in American junior colleges, also noted that reading research traffics in status surveys and program descriptions with few examples of program evaluation. Furthermore, he found that the majority of colleges which had evaluated their programs reported negative results.

Of the 18 program evaluations reviewed by Emond, 11 had negative results and 7 revealed positive findings. When one examines the differences between these studies, it is interesting to note that those reporting positive results reflected in their designs the unique characteristics and resulting needs of the population in community college learning centers. For example, one study reported by Emond revealed significantly higher grade point averages for students in a reading/study skills course combined with counseling sessions. In another investigation immediate and long term gains were noted when students in the remediation program carried reduced loads. Apparently programs which do more than address the students' academic weaknesses yield greater gains in academic achievements.

In lamenting the dearth of evaluations, Emond criticized

learning facilitators for conceiving programs without evaluation procedures in the design.

He concluded his analysis by urging learning facilitators to develop adequate and appropriate criterion measures of success, to improve measurement tools, to use appropriate statistical designs in program evaluation studies, to give greater attention to affective variables as predictors of success, and to weight list effective programs and methods.

Other investigators have reported more positive findings. Bushnell (8) observed successes as the rule, not the exception. And you may recall, Kerstiens pointed out to us in his keynote address in Anaheim in 1975 that "studies consistently confirm our conviction that we can successfully treat the non-traditional student." (27:4)

There appears to be no disagreement regarding the absence of program evaluations. Losak (30) noted that of the 822 dissertation topics dealing with research relating to junior colleges between 1918 and 1966 only eight evaluated programs for underprepared students.

Although the quantity of remediation research has increased, it seems apparent that evaluation reporting is still a neglected area.

A March 1977 ERIC search yielded 95 citations on college/adult developmental-remedial programs in the previous year, only nine of these represented program evaluations. Let us consider these for a moment. Barbara and Michael Tomlinson (51) reported significant achievements of Biology students in a special reading and study skills adjunct course. Their report contained a list of references, skills, methods and materials that provided the

basis for a program founded on research and successful practices. Birmingham (3) reported that students enrolled in individualized reading classes were found to have increased their reading levels an average of two to three years after one quarter of instruction. He included a basic course outline which stressed program goals among other things. However, the description lacked specific information in terms of references and materials. Reese (37) evaluated the reading component of a compensatory education program required for students who scored below 550 on the verbal SAT and also scored poorly on the comprehension subtest of the Cooperative English Test. All the students enrolled in the program made significant gains in comprehension.

In addition, Rodwick (38) of El Paso Community College, not in Texas as one might expect, but in Colorado Springs, indicated that of the students who needed and took a skills class only 29% failed in college English as compared to a 73% failure among those who needed but did not take such a course. The report did not indicate references, skills, methods or materials used. Ross (39) also examined a basic studies program for college freshmen and found that all students involved made gains in reading as well as self-concept. Her investigation of the effects of peer tutoring revealed that students made greater gains in the role of teacher than in the role of student. There were three experimental groups who were involved in a basic skills course with tutoring. Group 1 was comprised only of students who were serving as tutors; group 2 had been tutored and later became tutors; students in group 3 were being tutored. The control group took a basic skills

course with no tutoring. The study revealed students who are tutored and then become tutors made the greatest gains in reading and self-concept.

Recommendations at the end of this report stressed the need for adequate instruments for evaluating the progress of low achieving community college students. Experience as a tutee was suggested as better preparation for becoming a tutor than in-service training. In addition, Ross conjectured that self-concept might more easily and efficaciously be measured by one question at the end of a program: Do you feel better about yourself now than when the class started? One other recommendation worthy of note was the suggestion that community college low-achievers might benefit from more thorough teaching of skills with difficult material than with practice on larger quantities of easier material. She emphasized the need for more individual attention, not more individual assignments.

In a paper delivered at the IRA Plains Regional Conference in Wichita, Kansas in 1976, Huhn (27) described the development of a program designed to decrease academic failure in vocational education programs. Screening tests were constructed using passages from the textbooks required in each program followed by literal, inferential and vocabulary questions. Success or failure on the test was later correlated with success or failure in the program; preliminary results indicated a high correlation.

In addition to describing screening procedures, Huhn also outlined the skills that were emphasized as well as the references, methods and materials used. The methods employed followed the

format of teaching the skill thoroughly, giving ample practice time using materials from the appropriate vocational area and demonstration of mastery of the skill in an evaluation session prior to beginning the next skill.

In addition, this paper outlined a special controlled study conducted with nursing education students which was replicated five times. The results revealed a reduction in failure rate from 45% to 15%. Subsequently, students were required to pass the screening test prior to admission to the program. As a result, there were no student failures in the nursing program that semester.

The ERIC search also yielded reports with negative results.

An assessment by Florio (22) of the effectiveness of remedial reading courses at San Antonio College revealed no significant difference in grade point average between students who needed and completed reading and those who needed but did not take reading. Losak (30) evaluated the remedial program at Miami-Dade Junior College in 1968 and found that the program made no difference in student withdrawal rates nor did it produce a better overall score on a standardized test. In 1971 Losak (31) once again examined selected aspects of the reading-writing program of Miami-Dade Junior College. The results indicated that the program did not produce any meaningful difference in student withdrawal, in raising grade point average or in making significantly higher scores on a reading or writing test.

USING RESEARCH FOR CHANGE

Perhaps the staff at Miami-Dade Junior College would do well to study those programs that yielded successful results. Since Losak's studies did not describe the program in terms of what had

been done, how it had been done, or why, it was impossible to conjecture the reasons for failure.

Bushnell reported in 1973 that Miami-Dade was engaged in an experimental program replacing the traditional instructional patterns of the past with more flexible learning opportunities designed to accommodate individual students learning styles. (8:112)

There is as much to be learned from reliable studies with negative findings as from those with positive results if investigators analyze the reasons for failure and present recommendations that point up methods and materials that are to be avoided.

While there is no doubt that more institutional research and objective self-study is needed in the field of learning assistance (41), it seems appropriate to insist that investigations should do more than report findings. If the results are to assist educators in developing, implementing, modifying and evaluating programs, much more information must be given. The goals of the institution, the goals of the program, the objectives of the course, the course content, the strategies employed, the materials used and the evaluation design should be detailed.

With this information available, educators will be able to analyze research reports and adapt ideas, methods and materials appropriate to their situations. As Heard pointed out, "There can never be only one exact model for learning centers; institutions have personalities as complex as people do." (24:7) But it seems reasonable to emulate successful practices that are consistent with one's program goals and resources and to maintain a climate of change free from the tangle of constrictive assumptions.

We should applaud the efforts of those among us who investigate new methods and theories such as suggestopedia (26), memory storage (43), and brain hemispheric relationships (21). We should encourage much more scientific investigation into learning by becoming more involved in physiological research. We have the same need in reading/study skills that the field of psychology had when physiological psychology became a branch of the field.

And by all means, we should try out our existing models, modify them and, when the need arises, construct new ones; but let us happily discard them when we find they do not fit all the facts (7:209) remembering that learning centers are not places where things are completed or finished, but rather environments for growth and change that adapt and accommodate to the populations they serve.

ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE

When an evaluation reveals a need for change, how does one go about it? Bushnell (8) has listed six steps through which a problem solver should proceed in attempting to implement change. First, the problem must be diagnosed. This requires the involvement of the entire staff and should lead to a statement which sorts out the many variables operating in the situation and clearly defines the central issues and needs involved. Next, one must decide on the improvements to be achieved, the criteria to be met, the goals, and the specific objectives. The goals should be consistent with the philosophy of the learning center and the goals of the institution. Third, it is necessary to identify constraints and needed resources before selecting potential solutions and strategies. Constraints and resources can usually

be classified under the categories of finance, laws and regulations, human considerations, timing, facilities and demographic considerations. Step four entails the selection of potential solutions. All published data on the proposed change should be fully examined (42:53) to generate the most promising alternatives. Visits to centers utilizing the alternatives being considered can be helpful search procedures as well because the natural context is required for the full understanding of a problem. A visitation allows one to gain knowledge of the institution's traditions, commitments and clientele. The fifth step is the selection of alternatives based on the criteria established in step two. Feasibility, workability and effectiveness are common criteria. A final decision should be based on a weight-list ranking of the alternatives. Finally, the implementation of the selected alternative should involve procedures for initiation, evaluation and revision as needed.

The ultimate goal of change in our programs should be the nurturing of the potential of each individual to live a fulfilled and constructive life. (11:34) Cross (12), Roueche (42), Duncan-Hall (16), Strang (48) and others have indicated that we need not lower standards to do so; instead we must find ways to make learners successful and measure our success by our ability to bring and to keep educational opportunities within reach.

MAKING LEARNERS SUCCESSFUL

But just how do we go about this business of making learners successful? If we are to commit ourselves fully to the responsibility implied in the title learning facilitator, we must do more than just provide a climate conducive to learning that changes as needs indicate, as important as that is. We must couple our know-

ledge of learning theory with our expertise in the field of reading and study skills to cause learning to happen.

Strang (48:3) described seven principles underlying instruction:

1) Instruction should begin at or slightly below the point where the student is functioning. Diagnosis of each student's performance enables teachers to know where instruction should begin for each individual. The kinds of diagnostic information needed will in part be determined by the goals of the program and the student's goals. It is essential to make a comprehensive diagnosis on several levels if our program encompasses a broad view of learning. The broad view recognizes that learning is more than the processing of symbols (48:3), that the broad view includes acquiring meaning, expressing the meaning acquired, using knowledge effectively, and changing ideas, feelings, attitudes, and behavior.

Diagnosis should not be thought of as something to be completed before instruction begins. Since learning in its natural state proceeds from a response (42:41), diagnosis should be an on-going, continuous process where subsequent steps are guided by feedback from each previous step. Perhaps this should more appropriately be called feedforward. Emerging hypotheses should be revised and tested while in the process of working with the individual. While observing and giving instruction, the learning facilitator is able to determine the student's approach to the learning task, the skills mastered, and the areas of deficiency. Thus reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between diagnosis and instruction and insuring that no

gap exists between obtaining information and using it.

Another advantage of a diagnostic approach to teaching is the opportunity to meet the expectation of the learner that he will receive help with his learning problem - not promises that help will be forthcoming, but immediate assistance. The student has the satisfaction of accomplishing something each time he comes to the learning center or class, which leads to the second underlying principle.

2) Success has a tonic effect; nothing succeeds like observed success. By starting instruction at a point where success is assured, the learning facilitator capitalizes on the opportunity to improve self-concept. The instructor should take advantage of every opportunity to comment on a student's favorable progress. However, a word of caution, praise must always be sincere, specific and deserved. Indiscriminate praise devalues the effects.

As stated earlier, the relationship of self-concept to learning has been verified in the literature of our field. If we accept the broad view of learning and responsibility to maximize human potential, then we have set ourselves a truly difficult task. The difficulty of measuring personal development can be supported by examining the limitations of studies enumerated by investigators who have chosen to assess this elusive concept. Most complain of the types of measurement devices available and the difficulty in evaluating changes. Informal methods such as observation, interviews, rating scales and introspective reports are available currently to assist us in assessing this dimension which I consider one of the two

main goals of any learning program.

3) Respect for the learner increases his self-esteem and self-confidence. Concern for the individual, acceptance of his felt needs, and a willingness to listen and incorporate these felt needs into his individual program are means by which an instructor can convey his respect and genuine concern. Frequent conferences provide for an interchange and enable the teacher and learner to share I-thou moments. In addition, the student becomes involved in his academic destiny by helping to assess his performance, plan his program and evaluate his progress.

4) Learning takes place in a relationship. In conveying a warm friendly feeling and a positive regard, the instructor is able to demonstrate not only that he has taken the time to find out where the student is in terms of learning, what is interfering with learning and what needs to be done to correct the situation, but also that he cares whether that student succeeds. We are all familiar with such comments as "I wish my other instructors cared about me the way you do" or "If only I had had teachers like you in high school, I wouldn't have the problems in learning I have today."

Can we ever doubt the importance of human interaction in learning? The lament of the students of the 60's as expressed by Slater in his book The Pursuit of Loneliness (44) was the isolation of individuals from one another and the emphasis on responding

to objects not people. As a result, the children of the nuclear family have been trained to respond mechanically instead of naturally using their own viscera. We must re-learn ways to become reconnected to one another.

5) There is no substitute for skillful instruction based upon an analysis of the learning process. An instructor must know the content he hopes the student will learn, but equally important is a thorough understanding of learning theory. The importance of environment, motivation, organizational structure, sequencing from simple to complex, from concrete to abstract, method of presentation and an internal reward system are aspects of learning theory that must be given attention in program planning.

Learning experiences must include three factors:

1. Instruction - students must be shown how to do whatever the learning task is. It is not enough to tell students to find the main idea of a passage; they must be shown how to find the main idea.
2. Practice - ample time must be allowed for each student to learn. Time will vary according to background, interests and opportunity.
3. Application - students should be given the chance to demonstrate mastery by applying the newly learned skill.

Knowledge of cognitive and affective learning and their interrelatedness requires that learning experiences be designed in several forms, action, iconic and symbolic, and presented in alternatives that allow for varying learning styles, rates, abilities and motivations.

6) The dynamics of the situation influence learning success. The learning center should provide a positive atmosphere of learning and growing. Non-traditional students have an even greater need for an environment that is conducive to learning, one that acknowledges that all students can learn when given appropriate help and adequate time. (4) The accepting climate, caring staff, flexible and adaptable methods and materials, adjustable time limits and the interaction between student and teacher or tutor create a situation designed to result in successful learning.

7) Successful learning depends upon the utilization of all clues concerning the learner's strengths and weaknesses. Standardized tests give information only on the symptom-surface level. An approximation of the total picture requires first hand information and self analysis by the student. This can best be done by the communication of empathetic beings participating in one another's lives - KOINONIA.

CHALLENGES WE FACE

Therein lies our challenge: How do we service the increasing number of students with all their diversities and yet maintain

the ecologies and strategies we know to be essential in bringing successful learning within reach?

There are those who would advocate a media-assisted systems approach despite the warnings about our self-imposed subservience to technology. (44) Others suggest that a systems approach that emphasizes the ordering of procedures needed to solve tasks is best despite cautions about the limitation on the ability to generate alternatives outside the framework. (23) Some insist that student cognition is the primary concern of the learning facilitator despite evidence of the influence of affective learning on cognition. Others recommend an interactive theory as the foundation of learning programs in spite of admonitions of lack of control. Still others insist an individualized mastery-learning model is the answer despite the cautions about student procrastination and financial concerns. And we could go on listing the panaceas that are offered up to us every few years. But most of us know there is a piece of the truth in all of these models.

Our challenge is to find the organizational structure that suits our philosophy and goals cognizant of the fact that we won't ever be finished with the model. I am reminded of Thoreau's exchange with the sister of one of his students. She had been invited by him and his brother, John, to join the class at Haywood's meadow. Henry asked her what previous educational experience she had had. When she answered: "Finishing school," he said: I warn you...that John and I are not finishers. Nobody leaves us with a smooth surface. We rough up the consciousness, scrape the moss off young minds. (34:3) Not every teacher can teach like that,

but how grateful we are for those of you who do.

And if you think I'm leaving you with challenges, you are so right. Continue to rough up the consciousness of your students. Continue to cast conformity behind you and test out new theories and strategies. Continue to share your successes and failures. Continue to detail your investigations to enable us to benefit from your efforts. Continue to practice diagnostic-teaching in a warm and loving environment. Continue to enter into the lives of your students. Continue to have positive expectations from them. Continue the search for pieces of the truth. And continue to bring learning assistance within reach of all students. KOINONIA. As I said at the beginning, Plato never mentioned learning assistance, but he really should have.

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